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“TOP OF A CONTINENT”

Writer Dean Walker describes Shell's new Fiftieth Anniversary film on Canada's Northwest Territories, in an article reprinted from Shell News, employee publication of the Shell Oil Company of Canada, Limited

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TOP OF A CONT



INENT

By Dean Walker

One-third of Canada's territory – in fact, one-sixth of the entire North American continent – is, to the average Twentieth Century Canadian, a silent and forbidding land that still lies shrouded in mystery. This vast expanse – these 1 ¼ million square miles extending north from the boundaries of the provinces through the Arctic Archipelago to the North Pole, are the Northwest Territories.

Much has been done in the last decade to tear away the veil from this Arctic wilderness, as Canadians became aware of the potentially great mineral wealth that lies beneath its icy surface. Increasingly the call is sounded to 'Go North, young man,' – for there lies the last great frontier of the Western world awaiting development.

In this background of mounting interest, Shell will play a significant educational role with a film being released this month called *Top of a Continent*. The first film to be produced by Shell of Canada, it is a worthy companion to the many prize-winning films sponsored by Shell International over the years. And it is appropriate that the leading role in Shell of Canada's film should be played by this brooding sub-continent, largely forgotten for the more than 300 years since the early explorers first made their perilous voyages from the Old World.

The mighty sweep of the Arctic wilderness, the emptiness, the silence, the lonely grandeur of 12,000-foot mountain ranges – all this is brought home with eye-filling impact in the film. We are also introduced to the Eskimos, the North's cheery resourceful aborigines, and those Canadians who, from these northern outposts, carry out the vital tasks of communication, weather reporting and standing on guard against enemy attack.

There are 30,000 inhabitants in the Territories, including 11,000 Eskimos and 4,000 Indians. This would average about one inhabitant to each 57 square miles. Put another way, the population of a small suburb is living in an area the size of Europe. But the climate is not conducive to encouraging a larger population density. The temperature in mid-winter will drop to as low as 70 below and there often are winds up to 75 miles an hour.

Some of the people in the Territories work for Shell – exploration crews seeking to unlock the door to the oil riches believed to be there. The company's exploration permits cover more than nine million acres. And Shell fuels and lubricants are seen wherever the machinery and technology of the Twentieth Century has extended into this primitive land. The film portrays the vital role of oil in opening the north and points to the fact that it takes

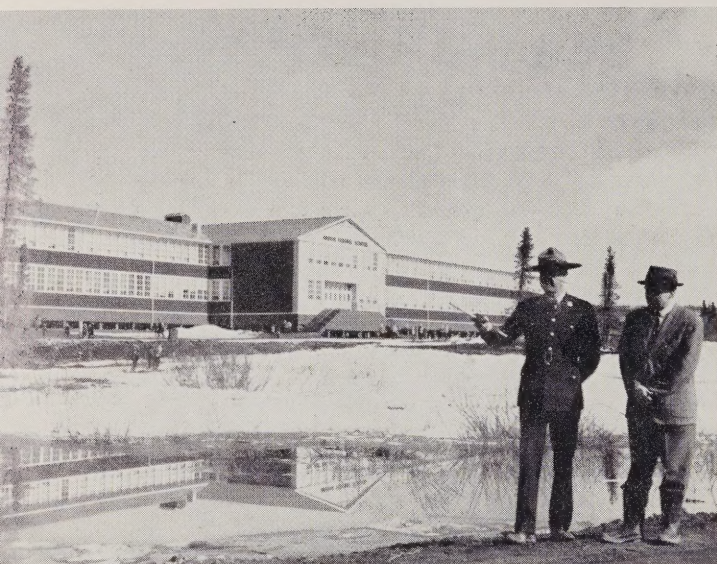
Off-loading Shell aviation gasoline at Isachsen weather station, on Ellef Ringnes Island, less than 500 miles from the North Pole.



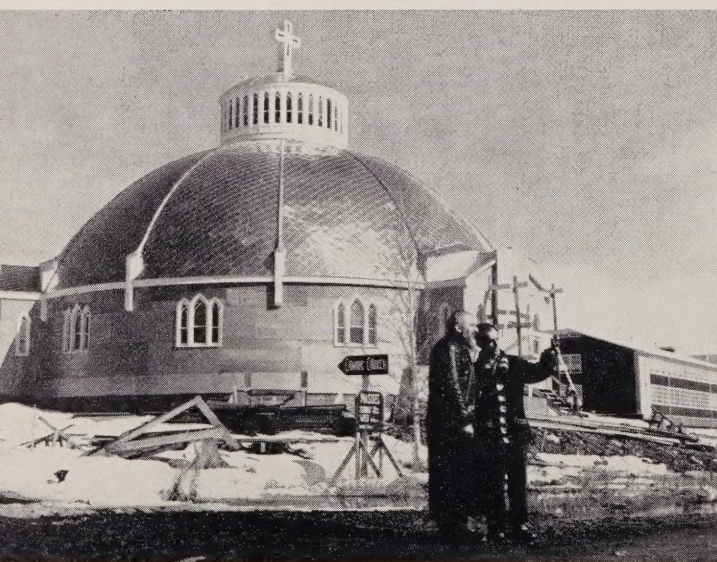
'The strange bulging eyes of the DEW-line.'



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Some of the Eskimo students attending this modern school in Inuvik were brought from as far as 500 miles by plane. They are quartered in clean, comfortable dormitories in the new town created by the Northern Affairs department near the mouth of the Mackenzie.



The distinctive form of this Catholic church at Inuvik is patterned on the igloo.

twenty tons of supplies a year to keep a man alive in the North, and fifteen of those tons are fuel.

'We feel we are partners in the development of the North,' company chairman W. M. V. Ash said in commenting on the subject material of the film. It is because of this partnership, this substantial effort to open up the top of a continent, that Shell of Canada, in its fiftieth anniversary year, devoted its first film project to telling the North's story.

Shell offered the challenge of making its new movie to the internationally famous Canadian film maker Budge Crawley, whose Ottawa company produces a million dollars' worth of motion pictures for industry every year. Crawley himself with his vitality, his understanding and love of Canada, his eye for pictorial detail, was just the man for the job. To help him, he chose his wife Judith as scriptwriter and two more cameramen - his top staffer, Stanley Brede and award-winning naturalist-cameraman Christopher Chapman.

Despite the distances, the people of the Northwest Territories are as close as the members of a club. Theirs is the true shared pioneering spirit. They move frequently from base to remote base by aircraft. They communicate continually by radio. Radio and aircraft are their basic tools of survival (with oil powering them both). 'You live glued to your radio up there,' Crawley learned. If anyone fails to answer a radio call for long, an aircraft will soon stop by to make sure he is all right.

There were problems for the film makers. Transportation around this huge area is complicated. Crawley found himself thumbing or buying rides on Department of Transport's DC4s, RCAF Boxcars, Shell exploration aircraft, and chartered Piper Cubs. Chris Chapman and Mrs. Crawley even made an entire exploratory trip with cabinet minister George Hees.

Cameramen stand still while they work - no fun in knee-deep snow at 30 below. Crawley and crew coped with this by wearing British army mukluks. At these temperatures, too, camera motors freeze so all equipment had to be winterized and relubricated with kerosene.

Crawley spent two summers and a few winter weeks shooting this film. He criss-crossed 75,000 miles over the area. And he captured on celluloid some of the most spectacular footage ever shot in the north.

- He filmed the 'strange bulging eyes' of DEW-line installations, science-fiction incongruities against the timeless background.

- He took shots of an Eskimo feeding his dogs in the midnight twilight, the chunks of bloody seal meat bright against the snow.

- He caught the cheekiness of snowmobiles scooting across snow as if it were a city street. And he filmed a city street too – in 4,000-population Yellowknife.

- As well as the panoramic scenes, he photographed the beauty of brilliant-colored flowers grasping a few days of life in the six-weeks' summer.

- He caught the sight of 10 thousand seagulls swirling from a cliff terrified at their first sight of man whirling past in a helicopter. Below dozens of white whales frolicked in the icy seas . . .

In the North, Crawley found beauty, companionship, a sense of pioneering, a challenging film assignment and . . . danger.

He chartered a small plane one day to fly to a remote base not too far from the Pole. This same charter line had suffered five crashes in the last two summers. Crawley's plane was big enough only to hold himself, the pilot and a drum of oil for the return flight. Near their destination they hit cloud, then driving snow.

'It was a "white out." All flyers up there dread them,' Crawley related. 'It is just like being in a bowl of milk. Vertigo sets in and you cannot even tell which way up you are or where the horizon should be. Everything, everywhere, is dead white.' (Crawley was especially alarmed: just the previous day he had heard of a plane flying straight into the ground during a white out: its pilot apparently had thought he was flying horizontally.)

At that moment a hill loomed from the whiteness in front of them. With a desperate wrench, the pilot swung his aircraft in a tight bank and they escaped.

They knew they were near the airstrip they wanted but had no idea of their altitude. Slowly the pilot inched the plane down until he felt a wheel touch something more solid than a snowflake. He held his breath, dropped the plane quickly and, with a jolt, they were safely landed.

That pilot, who had been flying in the North for years, admitted to Crawley later that he had never been so scared in his life.



A Polar Shelf Exploration Team's camp at Isachsen is a scene of busy confusion.



The film gives an intimate glimpse of Eskimo life, showing them both at work, as above, and at play, as in a fascinating sequence showing a tribal dance in Yellowknife.

Two Eskimo boys were intrigued with Chris Chapman's camera.



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But fliers up north are tough: 'Like a bunch of buccaneers,' according to Crawley, 'gambling their lives and their planes for big money.' One operator of an air charter service was badly hurt in a smash and an RCAF Boxcar carried him a thousand miles back to hospital. Crawley happened to be on board. 'He was in a dreadful mess. Yet he wouldn't even sit down. All through the flight he paced up and down, *worrying about what effect the crash would have on the morale of his other pilots.*'

There were laughs, too of course. Crawley filmed a great herd of muskox before the strange shaggy characters took fright and thundered away across the desert of snow. One little fellow was separated from the rest so Crawley caught him, climbed into a plane as casually as you or I would get into a car, and flew off after the herd. Judith Crawley sat beside her husband with the muskox on her knee. When they finally set it down and watched it scamper back to the herd, the producer commented sadly:

'We've probably ruined him for life psychologically. His buddies will just never believe him when he says he

has flown around in the air on the lap of a blonde!'

After two summers of flying, dog-sledding, boating and filming (he even ate seal flipper and caribou), Crawley returned to his Ottawa studio with 15,000 feet of film. From this expert editors picked the finest 1,200 feet for the 38-minute Shell movie. TV actor Lloyd Bochner narrated Mrs. Crawley's commentary and Dr. William McAuley, music director of Toronto O'Keefe Centre, conducted a 28-piece orchestra, members of the Toronto Symphony, to record Larry Crosley's original music. And sometime this month, the film will be premiered at a black-tie function for Northern Affairs, Department of Transport and other top government officials, and leading business people in Ottawa.

There will be premieres too in other main cities and in Yellowknife and Inuvik. The colour film will be available for all Shell employees, schools, service clubs and anyone else interested in seeing the film. A half-hour version will be offered to television stations later.

The message brought home by the film, perhaps for the first time to many viewers, is that the Northwest Territories are a vital and integral part of the Canadian scene. Everyone seeing it will learn of the part Shell and the oil industry in general are playing in their efforts to find beneath the rock, ice, permafrost and tundra the minerals which will help keep Canada rich. They will understand the difficulties and high cost involved in finding and producing oil in the northern areas and the valuable contribution oil is making to their development.

Shell's Public Relations manager, D. R. Prior, who supervised production of the film, summed it up this way: 'It has been said that Canadians sometimes do not sufficiently appreciate the importance of their northland. We hope that Shell's fiftieth anniversary film will do something to meet this need. Moreover, it develops an awareness that our company has confidence in the future of Canada and is making a real contribution to the country's progress. In addition to the entertainment and educational aspects of the film, it will help to explain the many aspects of our company's operations.'

Top of a Continent will bring Canada's unknown North closer to viewers around the world. And Shell may well feel proud to have presented this story.

Budge Crawley (right) produced the film and supervised the actual photography, much of it taken from the air.





Huskie dogs are loaded on a helicopter for transport to a scientists' camp 100 miles distant on the Polar Ice Pack.



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